O'BRIEN WEIGHS IN ON TEXANS PAGE C1

Rockets won't rush Harden back PAGE C1

HOUSTON CHRONICLE

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Cruz taps Texas mistrust of ethanol

Attack on federal biofuels mandate provides chance to appeal to base

By James Osborne

WASHINGTON — Ethanol. Oil states like Texas hate it. Corn states live and die by it. And politicians who try to take on ethanol often get buried in the issue's complexities.

Nonetheless, Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, continues to press ahead in the seemingly quixotic mission of lowering the cost for Texas oil refineries to comply with an increasingly pricey federal mandate requiring biofuels to be blended into the nation's fuel supply.

To do so, Cruz will need to win over a powerful block of Midwestern senators, something few in Washington give the sometimes divisive lawmaker a chance of pulling off. But for the junior senator, facing re-election this year as Democrats show new swagger in the age of Trump, ethanol provides the chance to appeal to his tea party base by bucking the Washington bureaucracy while protecting the powerful oil and gas interests so important to the Texas economy.

Cruz

After years of stalemate on ethanol, Cruz threw a twist into the debate by forcing President Donald Trump into a meeting with oil-state senators on the ethanol mandate, known as the Renewable Fuel Standard. He did so by blocking confirmation of one of his nominees for the Department of Agriculture. Trump told Cruz and other senators to find a solution that benefited both the oil and ethanol industries.

Cruz continues on A17

FRIGID TEMPS TAKING TOLL ON HOMELESS

Michael Ciaglo / Houston Chronicle

Tonya Sampson, who received a blanket from Star of Hope's Love in Action van, tries to warm up by a fire under the Eastex Freeway as temperatures hover in the 30s on Tuesday.

Two men are found dead near camps in downtown area

By Alyson Ward

Two men huddled near homeless encampments on the edge of downtown Houston were found dead Tuesday in the near-record cold temperatures that have buffeted Southeast Texas.

One man was found about 7 a.m. Tuesday in the 300 block of Hamilton near Minute Maid Park, not far from the Loaves and Fishes soup kitchen. The other man was found about 9:15 a.m. in the 100 block of Richmond near a homeless camp.

Police Chief Art Acevedo said in a tweet that both deaths are "believed to be the result of exposure to frigid weather."

The loss of life prompted renewed calls from Mayor Sylvester Turner for the homeless to seek shelter before the temperatures dropped again into the mid-20s overnight.

Large shelters suspended some rules to allow the homeless to get indoors, and a temporary warming center was set up by the American Red Cross at South Main Baptist Church's recreation center at 200 Colquitt. Free rides were offered by MetroLift to shelters or other facilities, the mayor said.

Acevedo said the police department's homeless outreach team would be working throughout the area.

"Hoping no more lives are lost," he tweeted.

With temperatures hovering about 30 degrees by midmorning

Homeless continues on A16

Help the homeless

Star of Hope accepts donations of blankets, coats, gloves, socks and other winter weather gear for the homeless. Drop off items at the donation and distribution center, 2320 Lamar, or donate money online at **sohmission.org**.

INSIDE *The bitter cold tests winter-wise Northerners, delivers a shock to much of the South.* **Page A14**

Growing protests kill 21 in Iran

Disaffected young people vent frustration with political elite

By Thomas Erdbrink
NEW YORK TIMES

TEHRAN, Iran — Anti-government protests roiled Iran on Tuesday, as the death toll rose to 21 and the nation's supreme leader blamed foreign enemies for the unrest. But the protests that have spread to dozens of Iranian cities in the past six days were set off by miscalculations in a long-simmering power struggle between hardliners and reformers.

By Tuesday, Iran's leaders could no longer ignore the demonstrations and felt compelled to respond publicly. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader, blamed outside "enemies" but did not specify who. President Hassan Rouhani, a moderate, appealed for calm while saying the protesters had a right to be heard.

But the anger behind the protests was directed against the entire political establishment.

While the protests that swept Iran in 2009 were led by the urban middle class, these protests have been largely driven by disaffected young people in rural areas, towns and small cities who have seized an opening to vent their frustrations with a political elite they say has hijacked the economy to

Iranians continues on A16

Runoff from Harvey poses threat to coral reef in Gulf

Scientists study impact on Flower Garden Banks

By Alex Stuckey

Adrienne Correa sucked in a breath as she slipped on her wetsuit 115 miles offshore of Galveston — but it had nothing to do with preparing for her 70-foot dive to the coral reef at the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary.

It had everything to do with her nerves.

About two months had passed since Hurricane Harvey deluged the Gulf with trillions of gallons of freshwater, upsetting the salty environment to which the marine organisms are accustomed. And she had no idea what

Scientists continues on A17

Michael Ciaglo / Houston Chronicle

Rice students Lauren Howe-Kerr, left, Anna Knochel and Jordan Sims test coral samples taken from the Gulf to study the health of reefs.

'Cryptic notes' raised alarm in Hyatt case

Writings found with weapons in suspect's room

By Meagan Flynn and Keri Blakinger

It was "cryptic notes" scattered around a Tomball man's downtown Houston hotel room — along with a stash of guns and ammo — that sparked concerns of a possible Las Vegas-type shooting plot on New Year's Eve, a top county prosecutor said Tuesday.

Two days later, that fear has all but fizzled out.

Russell Lawrence Ziemba was arrested Sunday at the Hyatt Regency Houston after hotel staff called police over Ziemba's allegedly drunken behavior — and officers then found an AR-15 military-style rifle, along with a shotgun, a handgun and some ammunition in his hotel room.

Ziemba

He is set to appear before a judge Wednesday on charges of allegedly assaulting a Houston police officer during his arrest in

Concerns continues on A16

WORLD

Trump tells North Korea: 'My button is bigger'

President Donald Trump again raises the prospect of nuclear war with North Korea, boasting that he commands a "much bigger" and "more powerful" arsenal of devastating weapons. **Page A8**

TELEVISION

Getty Images

Hoda Kotb will team with Savannah Guthrie.

Kotb to replace Lauer as co-host of NBC's 'Today'

Hoda Kotb, a longtime NBC News correspondent, will permanently replace Matt Lauer as co-anchor of NBC's flagship morning program, "Today." **Page A9**

CONGRESS

Hatch to retire, opening Senate door to Romney

Republican Sen. Orrin Hatch of Utah will not seek re-election after more than 40 years, opening the door for 2012 GOP presidential nominee Mitt Romney to run for his seat. **Page A8**

WORLD

U.S. service member killed in Afghanistan

A U.S. service member was killed and four others were wounded Monday during an operation against ISIS in Afghanistan. **Page A13**

FLAVOR

Paulie's owner ready to share saucy secrets

Paul Petronella, who grew up in his parents' restaurant kitchen in Montrose, says his new book is a family story first, a cookbook second. **Page D1**

Debora Smail

Paul Petronella's great-grandparents immigrated to Texas from Sicily.

Index

Business	B1	Daily Digital	A2	Flavor	D1	Obituaries	B7
Comics	D7	Directory	A2	Lottery	C6	Outlook	A19
Crossword	D6	Editorials	A18	Markets	B4	Weather	B10

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